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Campaign crusades

Voter suppression ultimately unsuccessful, history shows

Brian L. Fife

For generations after the Civil War, adherents of the Democratic Party in the South passed laws to prevent certain specific groups, especially African Americans, from exercising their right to vote.

Overt violence, poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses and the use of the white primary were some of the formal barriers that prevented many Americans from practicing a civil liberty guaranteed in the Constitution via the 15th Amendment (for men) in 1870 and then the 19th Amendment (for women) in 1920. Over time, these barriers were eradicated by constitutional amendments, Supreme Court decisions or laws passed by Congress, especially the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Over the past decade or so across about half the states, voting rights have been restricted by members of the Republican Party.

Voter suppression campaigns have been conducted under the guise of preventing fraudulent voting. The problem with that line of reasoning is that it has no factual basis.

Voting experts, past and present, have long studied this alleged phenomenon. The conclusion is replete. Fraudulent voting is not a problem in the United States today, and historical claims of voter fraud were typically exaggerated for political purposes.

Does this in any way sound familiar?

One study between 2000 and 2014 included an analysis of more than 1 billion votes cast. A total of 31 cases of voter fraud were identified, which attests that voter fraud is not something to be concerned about in contemporary America.

Why, then, would some Republicans today make the argument that restrictions on voting are required to ensure people do not engage in fraudulent voting? The answer, of course, can be found in the history of the Democratic Party in the South following the Civil War until the 1960s.

Southern Democrats did not want African Americans to vote because they supported the Republican Party after the Civil War. Republicans at that time embraced emancipation and were willing to use the federal government to promote civil rights initiatives.

Republicans today are aware that voting restrictions have a disparate impact on recent immigrants, people of color, those living in poverty, college students and older Americans. Those fitting these demographical profiles are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates simply because their public policy views, and their belief about the proper role of the federal government in the economy, are better matched with the core principles of the Democratic Party.

Voter suppression is manifested in a number of ways in the early 21st century: strict photo identification laws; the purging of voter registration lists; strict laws governing convicted felons; the closing of polling sites, especially in minority neighborhoods; the end or the curtailing of early voting; and gerrymandering of legislative districts.

Why are Republicans across the country engaging in voter suppression? They are replicating the mistakes of the Democrats of the past. They are trying to limit the number of people voting because they think certain people will not support their candidates.

In Indiana, which has had a Republican governor since 2005, and where the state legislature has had a supermajority of Republicans for several years, there is much that could be done to reform elections. While it is facilitative that polls on Election Day open at 6 a.m., it is unfortunate that they close at 6 p.m. Polls in almost all other states are open longer than in Indiana.

To all residents who wish to vote on Nov. 3, Indiana law requires that voters be registered 29 days before the election to be eligible to vote. In 1972, the Supreme Court permitted states to have registration requirements up to 30 days before the election. The decision was based, in part, on the computer technology available at that time.

Despite the reality that computer technology has vastly been enhanced since the Richard Nixon era, Hoosier lawmakers have done nothing to change the state's voter registration requirement. In an era where thousands of dollars can be extended in credit in a matter of minutes due to computer technology, there is no justification for requiring people to register a month before the actual election or effectively waive their right to vote.

About 20 states allow same-day (or Election Day) registration, where citizens who are not registered can vote on Election Day after registering. In one state (North Dakota), government officials automatically register citizens to vote when they become eligible. North Dakotans have been automatically registered by their state government since 1951.

It was recently announced that Indiana state officials will not expand mail-in voting for the 2020 election, despite the pandemic. Perhaps President Donald Trump's unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud, rich in irony given the role played by Russia in the 2016 presidential election, had some influence on this decision.

The framers of the Constitution authorized state legislatures to create rules governing elections in their states. The 150 Hoosier lawmakers should embrace this responsibility and do whatever they can to make voting as accessible as possible for all adults who have chosen to make Indiana their home.

The cause of democracy is more important than political party affiliation. At this point in time, party adherents should focus on creating party platforms that will attract support from citizens rather than trying to make voting more cumbersome for certain groups.

History has not been kind to the southern Democratic Party of yesteryear, and it will not be flattering either to contemporary Republicans who promote the cynical cause of voter suppression.

Brian L. Fife, a Fort Wayne resident, is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His next book, "Citizenship in the American Republic," will be published by the University of Michigan Press in early 2021.

To learn

Read more at brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/debunking-voter-fraud-myth

To register

The deadline to register to vote in the Nov. 3 election is Oct. 5. Register at indianavoters.in.gov/

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